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SUBJECT: POVERTY AND VIOLENCE PLAGUE GUATEMALA CITY'S ZONE 7

REF: A. GUATEMALA 1468

[1](#)B. GUATEMALA 771

[1](#)C. GUATEMALA 1517

[1](#)D. GUATEMALA 1364

[1](#)1. Summary: On December 11, poloffs toured a 10-kilometer stretch of Guatemala City's Zone 7, considered a dangerous "red zone" of high criminal activity, and met with government, NGO and community representatives to better understand the issues affecting this marginalized portion of the capital. Begun as 47 illegal settlements of tin-roof dwellings in the aftermath of Guatemala's 1976 earthquake, this portion of Zone 7 has remained a non-transient community where - 32 years later - most residents still remain. While 40 out of the original 47 settlements have been legalized and two-story concrete homes dot the landscape where tin roofs once predominated, endemic problems of security, intra-family violence, and poverty continue to plague this 10-kilometer stretch of Zone 7, known to local residents as the peninsula.

The Ministry of Agriculture recently implemented an urban agriculture program designed to decrease hunger in the area, and community organizations have attempted to tackle the problems that plague the peninsula, with some success. However, scarce funding for community organizations limits their ability to more greatly address these crucial problems. End Summary.

#### Crime A Daily Part of Zone 7 Life

[1](#)2. According to Jhomwanny Fuentes Lopez, Deputy Director of the National Civil Police (PNC), approximately 60 percent of the peninsula's population are members of the 18th Street Gang or Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), although Fuentes believes that gang-related problems are more prevalent in other sectors of Guatemala City, such as Zone 18 (Ref A). Children and adolescents comprise a majority of the peninsula's population of 250,000, according to Fabiola Gonzalez, Social Coordinator in the Office of the Assistant Mayor, which may help to explain the high rate of gang membership. Robberies are a part of daily life in the peninsula, according to Fuentes, and drug distribution is also a major problem. Fuentes expressed frustration at lax laws and inadequate prison sentences that allow criminals to quickly pass through the justice system and return to their lives of crime, making it difficult for the PNC to have a positive impact on crime reduction.

[1](#)3. Deputy Director Fuentes also stated that criminals are better armed than are PNC officers and lamented the limited resources and personnel available to his team. According to Fuentes, 25 police officers - less than half the number that should be available as mandated by law - staff his police station responsible for patrolling the El Amparo section of the peninsula, which has a population of 23,860. After accounting for vacations and other administrative absences, there is one officer patrolling the streets of El Amparo at

any given time. According to Karina Melendez, Executive Director of the Institute for Social Cooperation (ICOS), an NGO based on the peninsula, there are typically two daily assaults on delivery trucks providing water, gas and other services to the peninsula and gang members demand that these drivers pay an extortion fee or "tax" to be allowed entrance into the community.

#### Violence Against Women Prevalent

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¶4. According to PNC Deputy Director Fuentes, the majority of calls that the El Amparo police station receives concern aggression against women, particularly intra-family violence. Qaggression against women, particularly intra-family violence.

Although the police station receives approximately 25 calls regarding aggression against women daily, the Ministry of Government has provided no specialized training to the PNC of El Amparo to help women who are victims of crime. According to ICOS Executive Director Melendez, intra-family violence is the most common issue that the organization's psychologist and therapist find among community members that participate in ICOS programs. Melendez explained that mothers who are victims of violence are often the perpetrators of violence against their children, making it difficult to break the cycle of intra-family violence. ICOS programs include counseling to mothers on how to respond to their children non-violently.

¶5. According to Gonzalez of the Assistant Mayor's office, the local government has organized support programs for female victims of crime and 40 individuals have requested assistance from a recently established Doctors Without Borders program for female victims in the less than two months that the program has operated. According to Melendez, it is well known that a sexual trafficking center exists in the La Bethania section of the peninsula and in a separate subsequent conversation, Jose Marroquin of the National Commission for Support to the Strengthening of the Justice Sector (CNSAFJ), indicated that a disproportionate number of female trafficking victims come from the peninsula area of Zone 7.

#### First Lady Focuses on the Poor

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¶6. According to Gonzalez, most of the peninsula's residents live in "extreme poverty" and a majority of residents participate in the informal economy as street vendors in other zones of Guatemala City, making their incomes sporadic and their family's ability to regularly purchase food increasingly difficult. On September 16, the Ministry of Agriculture (MAGA) established an urban agriculture program for settlements in Zone 7 to help address the area's urban poverty. The MAGA program is intended to complement First Lady Sandra Torres de Colom's Social Cohesion Council's "Solidarity Baskets" program, which provides basic food supplies to urban families living in extreme poverty. (Note: Ref B provides additional information on the First Lady's poverty-reduction programs. End Note.)

¶7. Through the MAGA program, families that have already been chosen as beneficiaries of the "Solidarity Baskets" receive four boxes of organic soil, a variety of vegetable seedlings, and technical assistance on how to grow the vegetables. According to Gerardo Garcia, Coordinator of MAGA's Organic Production Unit, the urban agriculture project has a total budget of Q9.8 million (USD 1.3 million) to service 105 settlements in Guatemala City (out of a total of 350) that the Social Cohesion Council has determined are priority areas. As of December 11, a total of 11,526 families in Guatemala City had benefited from the project in five of the capital's most impoverished zones. (Note: Zones 18, 12 and 7 are three of the five zones that have benefited from the urban agriculture project. Ref A has additional reporting on Zone 18 and upcoming septel reporting will focus on Zone 12. End Note.)

¶8. Brenda Castellanos, beneficiary of the MAGA program, praised the program's effectiveness in helping her community

to progress by giving them access to vegetables that had become unaffordable with the tightening economy and increasing market prices. Castellanos also expressed gratitude for de Colom's influence and stated that under the First Lady's leadership, "it was the first time that someone remembered the poor." Through the program, according to Castellanos, women have also had an increasingly important role in their communities and within their families since they are often responsible for planting and caring for the vegetables.

#### Community Organizations Provide Refuge

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¶9. Community members of El Amparo and La Bethania have joined together through organizations such as the Institute for Social Cooperation (ICOS), the Association for the Prevention of Crime (APREDE), and the Group to Strengthen and Improve El Amparo (GESA), in an attempt to develop positive programs in their communities. ICOS, the only NGO located in the El Amparo section of the peninsula, provides labor training and social services for the peninsula's children and adults with the goal of reducing poverty among the population, preventing at-risk minors from joining criminal gangs, and providing counseling to help reduce intra-family violence. Qcounseling to help reduce intra-family violence.

¶10. ICOS provides technical training in carpentry, shoe-making and bakery for children from ten to 17 years old and its "Community Kitchen Project" teaches women how to improve their families' caloric intake, as well as how to make and package pastries that can then be sold within the community for additional income. ICOS also provides a small library with computers that are connected to the Internet and its staff includes a psychologist and a therapist. The idea, according to Melendez, is to provide comprehensive training that includes family values and self-esteem, as well as technical training that allows participants to be "productive within their communities." Approximately 1,000 children participate in ICOS's programs each year.

¶11. The ICOS facilities provide one of only two green spaces in the entire ten-kilometer space that comprises the peninsula and, according to one community member, ICOS is an "oasis on the peninsula," providing a refuge for children from the often-dangerous realities of their daily lives and skills that can lead to greater economic opportunities. One mother recounted how her 23-year old son now works in carpentry, has never been a member of the 18th Street Gang or the MS-13, and provides money for his siblings to remain in school.

¶12. The limitations of ICOS and the reality of scarce access to higher education for peninsula residents remain, however. Most mothers were extraordinarily grateful if their children managed to complete the sixth grade and almost no one spoke of graduating from high school. According to community members, most youth, after completing elementary school, aimed to attend the Technical Institute for Training and Productivity (INTECAP), a technical institute funded by the private sector. USAID funds helped ICOS initiate its operations on the peninsula fourteen years ago and ICOS received Q1 million (USD 133,000) through the Ministry of Education in 2008. However, the GOG will not provide any funds to the organization in 2009, according to Melendez, and they may be forced to scale back their efforts.

¶13. APREDE, a social organization with limited resources, works with actual gang members to convince them to leave gang membership. APREDE works with GESA, another community organization that has been working in the peninsula for 23 years to provide recreational activities for at-risk youth as a preventive measure against joining gangs. GESA receives no funding from the GOG and must raise funds for each recreational activity that it organizes. However, it has partnered with the Ministry of Sports and Culture to provide training for activities ranging from soccer to karate.

¶14. Comment: Aggression against women, especially

intra-family violence, continues to be a serious problem in Guatemala. Programs and services such as the recently inaugurated 1571 hotline (Ref C), attempt to help female victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and other forms of physical violence. However, as demonstrated by this visit to Zone 7, much more needs to be done to address this issue. With most of the peninsula's residents already living in extreme poverty, a tightening of the economy puts further pressure on this impoverished urban population, most of whom must resort to eking out a living in the informal sector. Government programs that address issues of poverty are a positive and much-needed step for Zone 7 residents. However, to garner greater support from civil society and Congress, these programs must be executed with transparency (Ref D). The peninsula's sense of community helps it to tackle social, economic, and security problems. However, scarce funding for community organizations limits their ability to better address these problems. In the same vein, the need for additional police -- and for police who can work with the community -- is great. The Embassy is encouraging the GOG to increase quickly the size of the national police force in order to better serve communities that, like Zone 7, are very insecure.

McFarland